

Opening: Saturday, 14 November 2009 — 4 PM to 7 PM

Exhibition in Beijing: November 14, 2009 – January 16, 2010

Opening Hours: 11.00 am – 6.30 pm, from Tuesday to Sunday

Not Vital “NOT WHY”

Swiss artist Not Vital (*1948) leads a quasi-nomadic life between his residences in Agadez (Niger), NotOna (Patagonia/Chile)¹, New York (USA) and his original hometown, the Engadin village of Sent (Switzerland). For two years now, Vital has also had a studio in Beijing—“for the first time after more than ten years, [I have] a sculpting studio again”, he says. The works he has created there, some of them very large in scale, are now being presented in the comprehensive exhibition “NOT WHY” at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing.

At the center of Not Vital’s work is the exploration of the spatial, economic and cultural contexts of his various places of residence and activity. This has developed since the early 1970’s and even then articulated a very modern equilibrium of regional and international approaches. Analogous to the attraction that New York held for artists at that time—luring Vital to SoHo as well—the artist remarks that he is “fascinated by the Chinese passion for art” at present. Beijing’s exciting production possibilities, good spatial conditions, vibrant art scene, and intriguing social melting pot—all of these factors have inspired this Swiss artist enormously.

The artist’s new environment is clearly reflected in his recent works, characterized—as always with Not Vital—by the highest conceptual stringency, fine irony and a sound knowledge of the local cultures and narrative traditions. “Beijing Duck in Gold” is the title of a sculpture that is formally an emulation of the famous delicacy, but comes with a golden surface and thus alludes to the economic upheavals of China’s turbo capitalism. Ecological issues are addressed by “(Mongolian) Cow Dung”, a bronze sculptural reference to this still very popular natural fuel. And when Not Vital has the famous wart on Mao Zedong’s chin carved out of coal (title: “Zhi”), transforming it into an outsized sculpture, he is suggesting that the long shadow of the Great Leader and Chairman is still quite present.

Vital sees his art making not only as an activity that reflects upon society, but also as a concrete set of instructions for the immediate reality. His adobe buildings in Niger, West Africa, such as the elementary school that he designed practically as a “human sculpture”, speak to the artist’s pronounced accountability regarding questions of social impact. The exhibition in Beijing presents more models for planned buildings. Among other projects, Not Vital shows an amorphous piece bearing the title “Model for a Station in Ouagadougou, West Africa”, a prototype of a bus station with natural air conditioning for this hot, poor city in West Africa. By taking this African question all the way to China, says Vital, he is practicing global art.

Text: Christoph Doswald

Translation: Werner Richter

¹ NotOna is the name given by Not Vital to an island that he bought in Patagonia, Chile. It combines the artist’s first name with the name of the indigenous population originally living in the region, called the Onas.